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Tree cutting riles residents on the Island

Community fears the action is setting the stage for expansion of the airport

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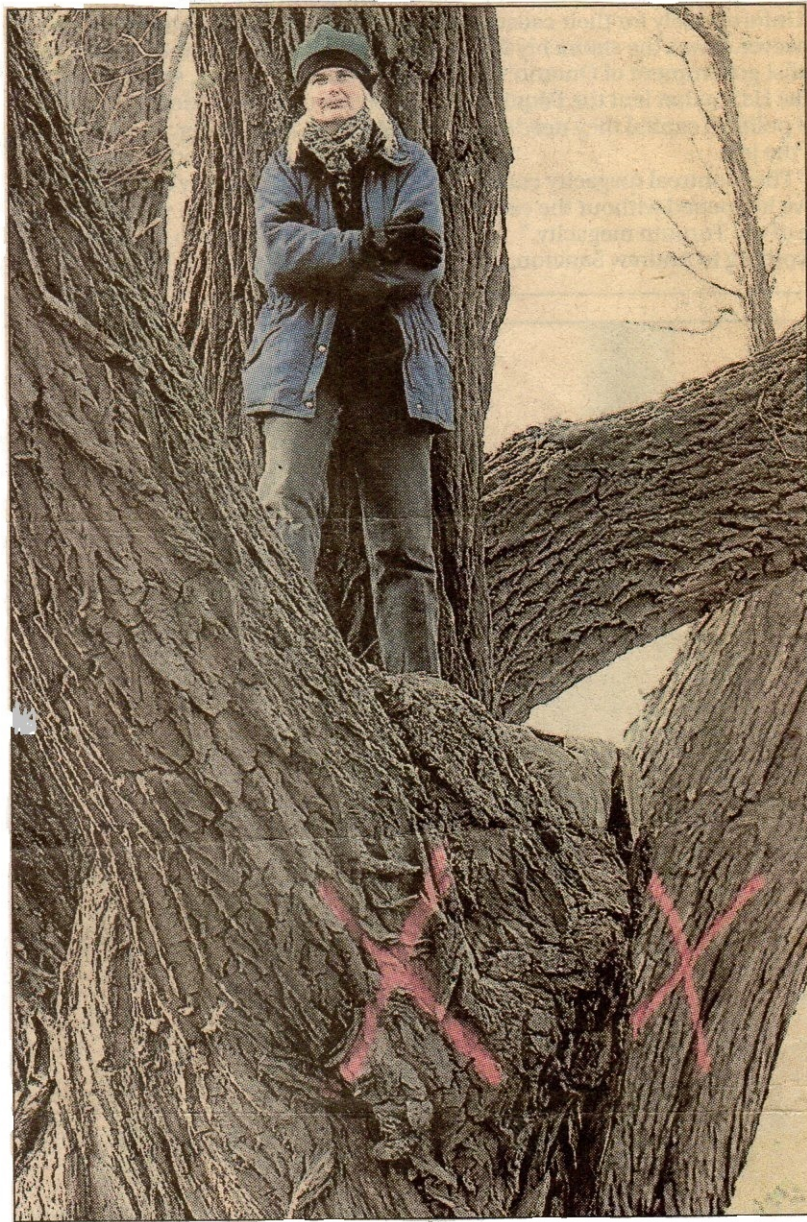
Gnarled wind-blown willows, poplars and maples at Hanlan's Point have been marked for cutting, in a move some Toronto Island residents fear is a step toward expanding the island airport.

Looking at the fluorescent-red X marks on 50 trees, some of them with trunks three metres wide, Mary Hay said yesterday she feared the grove at the western end of the islands could be clear-cut by the end of the week.

"There has been no discussion with the public, there has been no chance to comment," said Ms. Hay, vice-chair of the Toronto Waterfront Coalition.

"It would completely change the character of the park," said Ms. Hay. The popular Hanlan's Point Park recreation area includes swings, a wading pool and dozens of picnic tables. The arching trees block a view of the end of a runway of Toronto Island Airport.

But the city's chief forester said the trees are a continuing hazard to planes. Richard Ubbens said long shoots have to be hacked from the tops of the fast-growing trees by city crews each year to meet Transport Canada requirements for maximum height of trees around the runway. If the expensive pruning isn't done, planes have to come in at a steep angle and can't use the



JOHN MORSTAD/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Mary Hay of the Toronto Waterfront Coalition stands on a tree yesterday marked for removal near the island airport. She is upset about the move to cut several trees.

full length of the runway.

In a meeting on the issue last week, city parks officials discussed starting over with different species of low-growing trees, Mr. Ubbens said.

"We can keep hacking the trees back or we can look at alternatives," he said.

Many of the Hanlan's Point trees have been badly mutilated by repeatedly being chopped off at the top, he added. Among the trees are short-lived Manitoba maples, considered a weed species.

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However, waterfront activists worry there is another agenda behind the sudden decision to cut the trees. Ms. Hay said the coalition of island and city environmental groups believes the move is part of an ongoing effort to make the small-craft airport usable for larger aircraft and jets.

Last summer, the federally controlled Port Authority, which runs the airport, moved buoys to expand areas to the east and west of the airport in which boats are restricted, Ms. Hay said.

The authority also had the marks put on the trees on Hanlan's Point that it wants to see removed. The area marked for clearing is wider than the approach to the runway on current charts.

"These mature trees and aircraft have co-existed here for 17 years. Why are they making such a drastic advance now?" Ms. Hay asked.

No one from the Port Authority was available yesterday to comment on the changes.

There is no schedule for when the cutting would take place, said Doug McDonald, operations manager for Toronto's Parks and Recreation Division.

City parks officials want to replace the tall trees with shorter trees and shrubbery that would not interfere with planes, Mr. McDonald said.

Mr. Ubbens suggested there are short species of willow that would grow as well as the big crack willows found on the islands.